

PENUMBRAL HYBRIDS
Jim Leftwich

Watch Your Step

We emerge from a genetic matrix, coded to certain propensities and predilections. We live embedded in a web of signs. Learned behaviors are not hereditary. Subjectivity is a relational multiplicity. Memory is a process, not a retrieval of stored images and information. Consciousness is a function. Thought is a thing. Intersubjectivity is the semiotic adjacency of partial identities constructing each other as the gap which substantiates each of them elapses. If we omit enough of any currency we will locate an agon between what we can then construct as a dialectic, not thesis and antithesis as such so much as a palpable tension we imagine as liminal between them. At present we might posit a binary opposition of the postmodern and the new age as phenotypes of a larger cultural ideology. There will be in this scenario according to the logic of the dialectic a synthesis as yet unavailable to our attention. Unless we wish to move from currently accepted modes of theorizing to archaic epistemologies such as divination, we will need to take as a fundamental tenet not simply that we don't presently know what this synthesis will be but that in any speculations currently optional for us we will encounter only inaccurate models of its emergence. This must be true at any moment in history concerning any speculation. The overwhelming probability inherent in any speculation is that it is all but entirely inaccurate. We assume, in the course of our everyday actions, that we are able to infallibly predict large portions of the unfolding immediate future. This faculty has many names, among them common sense and knowledge. Certain things are givens, such as the laws of physics; other things are so generally agreed upon as to have about them the probability of natural laws. We know what we can expect from the floor, therefore we can walk across it. We know what we can expect from specific groups of people, therefore we can participate in those groups. We read patterns, as if each of the tiniest actions in our lives is a casting of the I-Ching, and through this reading we conduct ourselves as if we are able to reasonably predict the myriad outcomes which will construct an immediate future. This capacity serves us well in day-to-day operational activities. We encounter severe difficulties when we begin to read the surfeit of miniscule details which constitute the patterns constitutive of any instant. There is too much there for all of it to be readable. Small things are slippery, and they shift. What at one moment seems certain, a given, might at the next moment seem something else, and not quite so certainly even that. We find that the generally agreed

upon becomes proportionately less and less the more we attend to the minute components of any given moment. As the polysemous potentialities of a reading of one's immediate circumstances increase, the predictability of one's immediate future decreases. Loren Eiseley tells the story of a physicist who, as he delved deeper and deeper into the mysteries of the molecule, became increasingly eccentric until he was discovered one day walking the halls of his department wearing enormous, padded boots. If most of the atom is made of the emptiness between its orbiting electrons, one must be on guard against falling through the floor. We might take the likelihood of falling through the floor as a given, and gather in groups where this is agreed upon, where it is accepted as common sense. At least this would give us a fresh point of departure as we busy ourselves with the daily routine of speculating about the future. We have been wrong for long enough beginning our speculation in the current array of illusorily oppositional ideologies. Pataphysics has been defined as the science of improbable solutions. Perhaps we should consider extending that definition to include a science of improbable assessments. If we continue to construct models of our futures from the current ideological array, and if we continue to use the acceptable modes of theorizing, I suspect we will be correct in assuming we can predict with reasonable probability much more than just the immediate future. This is the most sobering prediction I know, and it is why I advance alternatives which at first glance and on the surface seem certainly absurd.

6.28.01

The Rebirth of the Author

We are beginning to witness the inevitable rebirth of the author. The bastard is back, precisely fatherless, resplendent in none of his earlier glory, less than even we have ever imagined him to be, and this time he is for the most part transparently a woman. One of the early signs of his resurrection was a rapid decline in the instance of published interviews. The new author, cloned or thawed in some Lascaux-like laboratory located everywhere except in France, resembles in no salient significances her earlier incarnation. One notices immediately the absence of all egoic posturings towards authority and influence. The new author is indifferent to history and psychology. While the dead author worked non-stop for thirty years to establish her place in the higher echelons of literary history,

her mutant love-child slept in a dream of promiscuous refusals. Early in January 2001, at the dawn of the third millennium CE, as George W. Bush prepared to assume the position of Chief Icon of the Empire, the new author sat down with his mother in a bombed-out church (whether in Latin America, Africa or Eastern Europe is still unclear) and submitted to what may well become the only interview of its epoch:

Dead Author: Do we not speak all languages in the final decades of the umbilical process?

New Author: No literary principle remains standing thin in spirit on the beast of the page and in a corner of its essence. The innate value modified by magnetic statement, without hermetic atavisms at the apex of a conglomeration, cannot conceive the terminus of an elitist marriage without its spiritual body contrived as if in chains in the midst of nothing to speak suddenly another magical origin of brutality.

DA: In other words, an escalation of subversion is native to language as reality?

NA: The body otherwise would never have been an introduction of the other into this poisonous anarchy of signification. The nightmare without a sound is something like an impotent chiaroscuro. A void of spirit, without the intervention of gravity and logic, blames the brain for instilling its gods in the emptiness of a tortured content. An agony of normal release furnishes the accidental network with the sleep of a ghoulish freedom. No incarnation of catastrophe nourishes the bloated data. Between the mystery and its thought the mouth finds interferences of care.

DA: The social alteration of speech is a conventional aberration controlled by the syntax of an immaculate economy. What do you see as the poetry of a daily completion?

NA: There is nothing left to bluff into a proposition of values in decline. The idea once done is against the gesture already life. In order to substantiate the definition of a body as it is born, we choose to manufacture both essence and existence. The volatile conclusion holds in contempt the impotent dignity of the father, the trickery of the spirit disgusted in a seizure of its own thinking.

DA: The world is conscious of its translucency as world. Who should the

poets create as a neighborhood history of the poets?

NA: A dialectic of matter dispenses with the quick caverns of culture. I am animate enough to register the eternal silliness of angels, but the process is a return from creation to abandonment in order. An incorrigible sense of concrete quantity preconceives the scheme. I am left to risk the insatiable simplicity of perpetual accident.

DA: I would contrast the imperial misnomer of literature with a discontinuous succession of writers and lacunae. What is being immediately written in which the language might offend a greater emergence?

NA: By now humanity is asphyxiated by his advances. A genital symmetry measures the epidemic. The particularity of revolutionary nourishment survives only in electricity and tireless misdeeds.

6.29.01

Super Reid: A Syntax

Almost every day I drive past a building on Preston Avenue that is called Reid's Market, or occasionally Reid's Supermarket. On the facade are the words, in this order and approximately these proportions: super REID market. Everyone ascribes the apostrophe s, ignoring what is actually inscribed on the building, thus the possessive naming of the place. And everyone ignores the syntactical sequence, either omitting the initial word, or relocating it so as to render conventional syntax. No one calls the place Super Reid, no one calls it Reid (or Reid's) Market Super. Regardless of the actual ordering of the writing, and regardless of the absence of indications of the possessive, everyone reads it as it is intended. We could say the writing is a label, and although it is mislabeled, we still know what is being labeled, so we simply correct the inaccuracies, translate the text into what we assume it must obviously mean. We could also say the writing is a code, and we know the rules of its encoding, so we are able to almost instantly decipher it. I would prefer to assume that, since Mr. Reid owns a market, he is clearly a great man, therefore the moniker Super Reid. And his market, naturally, would be called (The) Super Reid Market. These are desperate days; maybe nonsense and arbitrariness will help us see the light. I would prefer that each of us make it up as we go along, which we

do in any case, without relying quite so heavily on the glorious traditions established by those who have made it up before us. Language will readily emit meanings within around and without us. There is never a want of meaning in the presence of any sort of language. Language is itself in any context encountered by anyone at all always an excess of meanings. As such, it offers ample access to an actuality of any swarming instant. It is its social function that shuts it up and shuts us down. We agree for language socially encountered, publicly exposed, to mean next to nothing as compared to the actuality of its signified array. Reid's Super Market is Reid's Super Market, no matter that it says spells and signifies Super Reid Market. What it says is nonsense, which means is not useful, and the utilitarian rules the daily operations of the social sphere, so we all agree to have it say something simple and pragmatic. We know what it means. Who cares what it says? With all due respect to the civility and serious commonsense of a contrary injunction, I would suggest that all of you should certainly try this at home. And, if my surmise is correct and the damage done is not too debilitating, I suggest further that all of you take it to the streets. Why should we put up with the orgiastic excess that is language producing meanings being translated into some lowest common demonator of societal pragmatism? The Situationists were on target, but they largely wanted to keep making sense. It saddens me to say so, but we simply can't keep on making sense like there's no tomorrow, like it's all just another day, like nothing is at stake. Sense is the essence of the problem. Any instance of sense will be appropriated eventually into the latest configuration of the dominant paradigm. By the law of the dialectic our most oppositional excursions into anti- this and that will fuse with the hated thesis and reemerge as an integral tenet of the now dominant synthesis. And we will start all over again, making sense, serving ourselves up as lunch for the insatiable Beast. The lesson of the supermarket sign is, at least for writers, for poets, that the tangling and torquing inverting and varying of syntactical sequence will not likely lead us out of the woods. It will simply be converted to some sort of pragmatic sense, translated into something preferable to the original, decoded so as to cease offending with its unseemly nonsense. We have agreed that this dream, this fiction, is preferable to any risk of actually being in the world. We'll prop it up at any cost. It seems clear enough that Being however qualified is not a social being. And it seems clear enough that knowing something about Being in the world might be something very much worth doing while being in the world. But there's a kind of lazy allure to seeking the comforts of a shared illusion, as if loafing around the pool by the links after a heavy meal is a reasonable *raison d'être*. Syntax was a good idea, shuffled and

scrambled, as a site for the attack. But it didn't work, doesn't work, and can't work. Our strategy doesn't need to change that much, though some of the assumptions have got to go. What we need are extreme tactics, and a few serious folks who are ludicrous enough to genuinely love the risk. Next time we're near Super Reid's Market let's see if we can get something more substantial to chew on than syntax.

7.22.01

What Mark Sonnenfeld Is Doing

- lines tabbed to begin at ten different places on a page which contains sixteen lines
- a one-word-line which ends with a period, thus a sentence, in which the sole word is either a neologism or a phonetic spelling ("clic")
- capitalized words arrayed irregularly across and down the page to produce an asymmetrical visual rhythm
- words fused so as to have no effect on denotation ("thousandtimes)
- non-referential proper names ("Goodwin") associated with opaque modifiers, as in "a (xiv) Goodwin"
- a line which consists of a comma
- letters treated as nouns, possibly as characters ("h on Y / for shoulder s"), or, again, possibly as marks in phonetic scores
- displacement of letters as in "Clearly e 2 beset", where the isolated 'e' seems to belong with the aforementioned "h on Y"
- fragments of words seemingly produced by computer cut and paste techniques (see example in previous entry)
- phonemic misspelling to distract from denotation ("salP")
- sound mimicry used to diminish denotation and increase association ("I v-close / I see, I stand")
- numerals in isolation used as pure sounds and as visual ornamentation, as in "(3-4)" and "2-1,"
- homophonic translation ("i-lash")
- barely pronounceable non-words or purely visual letter strings ("Yppah")
- prefixes without roots ("the de-")
- roots and prefixes which appear on different pages, as "de-" on page 2 and "m ä nd"" on page 3
- diacritical marks displayed both as score and as ornament ("m ä nd")
- truncated words ("typewrit")
- words and letters in different type styles scattered for purely visual effect

across the page, as on p.4, "jh" in bold, "dong ting white mother" in italics, rest of the page in plain type

- non-referentially captioned photographs, as in a photograph of an abandoned storefront accompanied by the line: "s. of nox, pean moths, o^o names"

- obliquely captioned photographs, as on page 6: three photographs, one of train tracks, one of a tree by a lake, and one of a highway, accompanied by the line "øm mads, no madic knabb nab, brain cloudylike"

all references are to the chapbook Jewish Hair and Neptune, Marymark Press, 2001

7.22-23.01

Subjectivities

Revision

Don't revise. Or maybe I should say: try to refrain from revision (this will require some work). If your concentration is sufficiently attuned, if you can manage an attentiveness almost obsessive, if you can attend to each word as if it is a world, then there will be no need for revision. If not, the best you will achieve is a relatively seamless collage of your own very disparate thoughts.

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A collage of one's own very disparate thoughts, if intended as such, might be a project well worth the work. But the seams should be left showing. Thought is always plural, more roiling than sequential, bubbles in a boiling pot. It would not be wasted effort to intentionally write this quality of thought.

3.19.01

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from a letter to Tom Taylor, quoted in Diction Part 3 (Wed, 6 Mar 1996)

The surreal is finished as a tactic. Try to use it as a means of influencing the reader, manipulating towards some jolt, zen slap/epiphany, any of that, and you'll be met with the bitter cynicism and/or indifference that is usually reserved for commercials. Cartoons, MTV, ads for Scotch and Hondas are surreal; the poets have to come up with something better than that. And an all-encompassing irony will not suffice. The movement, by whatever means, must be away from subjectivity. (Not that there is no self, but that there are multitudes within each self, and that a radical openness blurs the boundaries that normally serve to define the area of individual identity.) Collage assists in this aspect of the project; so does citation. But the more you add, the more complex the territory becomes, and the peril is that the cacophony of disparate voices will blur to white noise, and the result will be a free-for-all, reader response, a return to the subjective. Impossible as it seems, there has to be an attempt at presenting the truth, and some notion of ethical action. Starts with the self, no doubt, but means nothing if it does not move beyond. The idea is that experience of "the progressive series of seizures", that is, poetry changes the poet, fundamentally alters the human being. The repeated acts of making poems are rites of initiatory transformation. The poet acquires an ability to alter reality with words. The smaller units of the language, embedded in the poem, are revealed upon examination as instances of alchemical transubstantiation. The apparatus of perception is altered fundamentally.

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Whether we want it or not, and with or without surrealism, the movement by whatever means is always towards subjectivity. An investigation of the subjective will move inexorably towards investigations of, realizations of and in, consciousness. Consciousness is metaphorically an event or an object which has among its attributes such new vocabularies for the via negativa as include the atemporal and the non-local; it is as if an entity of an order entirely other than that inhabited by materiality. If one chooses to do so, one can conduct experiments, experiments upon one's self, upon one's subjectivity as it intersects a posited objectivity, and in that mid-point, that phase transition, between the subjective and the objective, one will be able to locate an interaction of subjectivity and consciousness. I, for the moment, until further unforeseen revisionings revise me, consider this the area in which the actual work is done. This is where the fineness of attention required by poetry as a spiritual discipline (cf. Hank Lazer, "Returns: Innovative Poetry and Questions of 'Spirit'," in *Fracture 2*) is

actually able to do its work, work at least directly analogous to that of the alchemists in their Great Work.. As David Levi-Strauss said in an interview with John High: "I think there are different paths that lead to the same place. But I do believe that what we're here to do is to transform matter into spirit." I believe the same thing. And I currently believe this transformation takes place as an extreme attention addressed to the site of subjectivity. This is at least one of the paths.

7.22.01

penumbral hybrids

Bob Grumman: ... "ignoring entire schools of poetry from a position of influence ... is far worse than attacking them since, of course, attacking people will render them visible, which is all most of us otherstreamers really want.

John Berger: Picasso was a vertical invader. He came up from Spain through the trap-door of Barcelona on to the stage of Europe. At first he was repulsed. Finally, he became a conqueror. But always, I am convinced, he has remained conscious of being a vertical invader, always he has subjected what he has seen around him to a comparison with what he brought with him from his own country, from the past. ... The fact that he was a vertical invader from the past was not, in any obvious way, a handicap, and it soon appeared to be an advantage. What it gave him were special standards with which to criticize what he saw.

John Blackburn: The revival meeting, the first of which was probably the famous Cane Ridge Revival in the summer of 1801, was, and still is, a transforming experience for many, primarily in the rural South. Finster himself first felt called to preach in a tent revival in 1932 and later saved his money to buy his own tent, which he carried to towns across Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee, preaching his own brand of hell-fire and brimstone revivalism.

Revivalism is an interesting expression of faith, and one which informs Finster's art more than any other single cultural influence. In general terms, the tent revival is loosely organized and allows for the spontaneous participation of anyone who feels "called" to participate. Further, the sermon is often at least partially improvised, and the overall emphasis is on feeling and sincere expression of emotion.

The same performance values may be seen in Howard Finster's art. It is stylistically quite loose, with figures and text and dashes of exuberant color all virtually leaping out at the viewer. Finster's art is seemingly spontaneous, and, in a larger sense, Finster himself has unexpectedly found himself testifying and preaching through painting, like a worshipper spontaneously filled with the spirit and called to testify before the revival meeting. If we are to take his claim that his artworks are "painted sermons," then one must see the parallels between these paintings and the kinds of sermons which Finster has heard and sometimes delivered throughout his life. The revival sermon is often improvised, yet punctuated with certain stock refrains, just as Finster's painting is always evolving and clearly self-taught, yet adherent to several recurrent themes and motifs. Furthermore, it apparently matters little to Finster that his work shows him to be untrained. The revivalist emphasis on the worthiness of any inspired person's participation underlies such unabashed amateurism. The result is a body of work which displays both an urgency about its thematic content and a self-assuredness about its presentation.

Hank Lazer: A noteworthy and eccentric example of writing 'spirit' anew is the multifaceted body of work produced by Jake Berry. A musician, visual artist, and poet, Berry's location in Florence (Alabama) as well as his rare travels mark his work as part of a tradition of intensely individualistic exploration — part of a lineage that might run from William Blake to Frank Stanford. An active correspondent, and a poet whose work has received considerable circulation internationally (through the zine world, international postal art shows, and small press /independent publication), Berry's work bears kinship to that of southern visionary folk artists, religious visionaries, traditional blues/folk musicians (including Bob Dylan, with whom Berry has played). Perhaps the most sustained inheritance for Berry is a fusion of Christian traditions — from his Church of Christ upbringing (Berry's father is a minister [as well as an engineer]) — gnostic Jewish traditions, ancient Egyptian religion, and Voudoun, enriched by Berry's readings in myth-based poets such as William Blake, Charles Olson, and Michael McClure.

Jake Berry's work can be seen and heard as participating in a tradition of art-work that goes by various labels such as self-taught, 'outsider' art, or visionary folk art. For example, Berry's work — particularly in its interplay of script and visual imagery — bears some kinship to that of Howard Finster, JB Murry (and his mystical script), and the gourd-writings of Reverend Perkins. ... Berry's work can also be placed in the context of more traditional 'textual' writings such as the work of Hannah Weiner or Antonin Artaud, or in the context of various book-makers represented in A

Book of the Book: Some Works & Projections About the Book & Writing (edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay, New York, Granary Books, 2000), particularly Aleksey Kruchonykh and Adolf Wölfli.

1.) Being visible is simply what happens when one decides not to work in utter isolation. It's not a goal, nor is it a great boon, and it's not a stepping stone to fame fortune influence fulfillment and, finally, tenure. It's simply the primary hazard of refusing isolation. If this is indeed what most of the otherstream wants, what I want is to disseminate evidence of an endeavor that exists on the margins of, tangential to, outside of the otherstream. I want to write a stream visibly other and/or against. But let's not try to name this just yet, lest we wind up with the abmodern and its unstream.

2.) The vertical invader, if indeed she remains conscious of being a vertical invader, and remains in fact an invader, unassimilated, will exist as an ongoing subversion in relation to all evolving currents. More important than the special standards by which she criticizes will be the special standards by which she creates. To be outside (or, more precisely, to be partially outside) is easy. We are all penumbral hybrids, amphibians, living half-in and half-out of a dominant culture. This is nothing to seek and even less to brag about. The trick is to begin, conscious of being a hybrid in a penumbra, to take the infusions intrusions and infections of the dominant culture as givens, and to move from there, consciously, intentionally, outwards, developing a centrifugal praxis, moving always away from a center. There's an art to this, but it's not the art of the canon, and it also is not the art of current practice evolving out of its selected lineage into and through its chosen context inexorably to the next sclerotic set of canonical conventions.

3.) We can (and will) do worse than make work that is "at least partially improvised" wherein "the overall emphasis is on feeling and sincere expression of emotion". Improvisation can assist us in evading much that is either dominant or cultural or both. With practice and a little patience we might even evade the little faceted mirror cultures which the dominant culture contains as resistance and reaction. On another note, it seems we have tossed out the dear sweet cherub of sincerity along with the nasty bath water of modernism. Damned shame. We're in a pinch, and could use its impish antics.

That it "matters little to Finster that his work shows him to be untrained" should not surprise us. It should surprise us that some of our work shows some of us to be at least somewhat trained. What did Grumman's friend Charles Bernstein say about authority, "all that I've ever been authorized to do is eat shit"? Chances are we've been trained to eat a little, too — and perhaps while we're at it to produce a little for others' consumption as

well. In relation to the arts, the only kind of training worth advocating is autodidacticism. Poet, write thy self. We can (and will) do worse than make "work which displays both an urgency about its thematic content and a self-assuredness about its presentation".

4.) Writing spirit (please note the absence of quotation marks) has nothing to do with either a lineage or a context where both are imagined as literary and/or artistic in any way. I have over the past five or six years, mostly in conversation with Ken Harris, proposed an alternative lineage for Brambu Drezi which would progress, beginning with Romanticism, along the line of Blake through Rimbaud through Artaud to Berry, a genealogy of "intensely individualistic" explorers, to say the least. But those who work on the writing of spirit have no need and indeed no use for lineages and contexts, not even flimsily constructed alternative ones like mine. I won't win any ideological fashion awards for attempting to make this point, but if the writing of poetry is in fact a spiritual discipline (and it certainly is for some), then the significant outcome of that practice has to do with its spiritual implications for the poet, the implications for what it might mean to be human and in the world, and not with its poetical productions which pale to utter insignificance in comparison. This is bad news for literature, and indeed for the entire literature/education complex, along with its adjuncts publishing/manufacturing and purveyance/distribution. The loss of all this would not be a great loss. What would be a devastating, an insurmountable, loss would be the loss of "intensely individualistic" poets who continue to write spirit without any regard for that writing as it specifically relates to literature. This statement has nothing to say one way or the other about the art and craft of writing poems; it has perhaps a little to say about the setting of priorities that seem obvious enough to this poet.

Traditions, lineages and contexts, no matter how alternative, whether self-taught, outside or visionary, are simply not pertinent to the practice of writing spirit. They are, however, essential to the process of reading written spirit, particularly if that reading is to be a writing of a reading. We seem to think that the creation of these lineages and contexts is somehow useful in relation to writing spirit. It isn't. The ancillary texts act as a substitute for the actual writing, and they spawn an at best tertiary writing of the "spirit", a writing which is actually the writing of a longing and a loss.

(7.23.01 / 7.27.01)

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